

Taking Golf Out of Golf Course

Assistant Professor Kelly Cederberg | University of Arizona

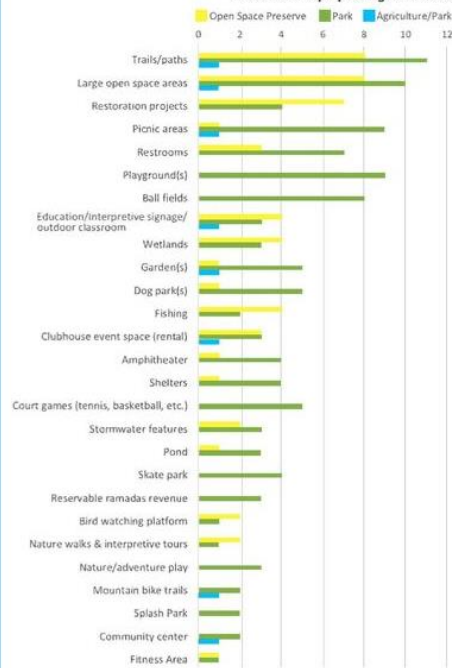
Sitting on a 115-acre plot and snaking 1.6 miles through the hills of Orange County, the Mountain View Country Club in Corona, Calif. was closed down in 2009. Since then, certain parts of the defunct course have been zoned for recreation by the Riverside County Planning Department. Reportedly, while a local development company is seeking to build 440 homes on the land, a large percentage of the homeowners adjacent to the course have formed an association to halt any developments and may find relief through a recent California Supreme Court ruling (see page 93).

PHOTO CREDIT: GREG FRANK, L&P





A look at 21 repurposed golf courses



Above: The Club at Los Rios golf course in Plano, Texas, was permanently closed in early October 2018. According to a local newspaper, the city plans to convert the course into a public park beginning in 2019.

Left: This bar graph, by Assistant Professor Kelly Cederberg in the School of Landscape Architecture and Planning at the University of Arizona, shows the data collected from her study of twenty-one (21) closed golf courses repurposed as parks and open space amenities (based on a database of 365 closed golf courses examined around the nation). The graph shows the amenities included in each closed-down (repurposed) golf course, subdivided by type of park conversion. For instance, 11 decommissioned golf courses that were converted into parks (green bar) included some form of trail or path; while just 8 closed-down golf courses that were converted into open space preserves (orange bar) had trails/paths. GRAPH BY KELLY CEDERBERG

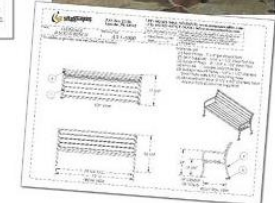
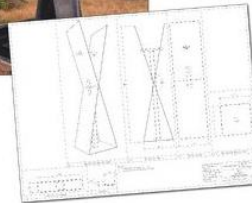
Golf course facilities in the U.S. have been closing in large numbers during the past ten years. According to the National Golf Foundation, 1,500 18-hole equivalent golf course facilities have closed. In 2016 alone, 200 golf course facilities closed nationwide. The main reason for a large number of closures can be attributed to the building of golf course communities in the late 1990s and early 2000s in order for developers to sell homes at premium prices, not due to the demand for golf. This issue is coupled with a decline in the number of people who play golf, which has created a surplus in golf course facilities with a less than adequate supply of golfers to support them. Golf course facilities are predicted to continue to close for several more years. The more significant problem with golf course facility closures is that these large parcels of open space are suddenly becoming available for new land uses including for potential development.

Turning golf courses into parks or preserved open space seems like a sensible alternative as parks provide many of the benefits that the golf courses provide including recreation, ecosystem enhancement, stormwater detention, and urban wildlife habitat. However, turning golf courses into parks has proven to be challenging. Many local homeowners are still holding out for the golf course to return or some other solution to present itself while the golf course sits vacant.

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Golf *Continued from page 90*

Left: The closed Ridgeline Golf Course in Orange, Calif. has a bee box next to the old clubhouse. The course sits on a private tract of land that has been the topic of many land use litigations (see sidebar on page 93). PHOTO CREDIT: GREG FRANK, LASN

This paper found examples of public parks and preserved open spaces that have been converted from golf courses, and identifies some of the financial aspects of how they were converted and what amenities they offer on what is normally a large parcel of land for a park.

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Methods

The data collection for this article took place in several parts. The first part involved identifying closed golf course facilities across the United States that had closed since 2006 when the number of closed golf courses started to outnumber the number of openings. Those facilities were then evaluated for their plans or lack thereof, for land use change. The second part involved identifying closed golf course facilities that have been repurposed as parks or open space within that national database in order to gather more specific information on those facilities.

Results

365 closed golf course facilities from across the nation were identified. 210 of those courses had some plan for future land use, and 46 courses included some form of park or open space, often with development. From that list, 28 were identified as having been repurposed solely into public parks and open space preserves.

Park Conversion

Now that these golf courses are parks and open spaces, we wanted to know, more specifically who owns them. The majority of these parks are now owned and operated by cities (10 of 21). Four of the parks are operated by regional park districts, three are owned and operated by non-profits, including one land trust, and two are state parks. Finally, one park is now a county park, and one is owned by a water authority, serving a dual purpose of park and stormwater management.

Funding for the conversion of the golf course into a park was found for 20 of the 21 precedent studies. The majority of the precedents are getting funding for conversion through a combination of sources. The results also reveal that there appears to be no real trend in funding. The funding these parks are finding come from a wide range of sources.

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Legal Troubles of the Ridgeline Golf Course

By Greg Frank, LASN

PHOTO CREDIT: GREG FRANK, LASN



Built in 1950, the Ridgeline Country Club sits in the middle of 'Orange Park Acres,' a multi-community enclave of mostly 1-acre properties nestled in a valley at the eastern edge of Orange, Calif. It was originally home to the Orange County Tennis Academy and the Orange County Golf Academy, reportedly one of the largest and most successful junior golf programs in the country at that time.

Once the golf course closed down in 2006, Milan Capital Management, a commercial real estate agency based not too far away in Anaheim Calif., purchased the 47-acre plot and attempted to change the zoning classification from "open space recreational" to "residential" in 2011. The real estate company was proposing to build 39-unit residential properties on the newly delegated zone.

Local residents, through an area wide 'Orange Park Acres Association,' which represents approximately 10 neighborhoods and 378 homes, banded together and were successful in including a referendum on their November ballots in the 2012 elections attempting to prohibit any development on the land. After the vote, the results showed that 56% of voters were against the rezoning of the defunct golf course.

Even though this would seem like a fair use of democracy, the city council of Orange actually ignored the voting outcome and continued to allow the rezoning of the parcel, going against the city's original 1973 Specific Plan that designated the land as recreation and open space.

Having the vote nullified prompted the Orange Park Acres Association to file a lawsuit against the city, which made it all the way to the California Supreme Court on October 30, 2013. The association argued that the original land zoning rule from 1973 had to be abided by and could not be changed.

In December 2016, the state's Supreme Court ruled in favor of the community association and reversed the designation of the land as residential, setting a statewide, and potentially a nationwide, precedent.

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Left: Once a thriving golf course, Lehigh Acres Trailhead Park, in Lee County Fla., was implemented a year after the 2007 housing market crash. Lee County Parks & Recreation purchased an 11-acre section of the golf course and developed the park for the encircling residential community. The park includes three rain gardens, a three-acre prairie containing native grasses, a 16-stall parking lot, two restroom units, an outdoor fitness area, three picnic pavilions, a half-mile paved multiuse trail and site amenities throughout.

Funding for continued operations and maintenance were primarily provided by city and county funds for city and county parks, state funds used for the state parks and Park District funds for the four parks that are part of the parks districts. Three of the parks are solely operated and maintained by volunteers, community groups and donations and a few more reported a combination of grants and general funds.

Amenities

The amenities included in the plans of these new parks reveal that all but one prioritizes trails as a major amenity of the park or open space. Similarly, almost all of the parks are preserving large areas of the parcel as open space. Almost half of the parks and open space areas include picnic areas and restrooms. This is likely due to the larger size of the parcel and therefore the park or open space. As expected, preserved open space has more educational components, wetlands and restoration projects while the parks have more traditional forms of recreation such as sports fields, playgrounds, dog parks, etc. Some unique amenities found included BMX tracks, mountain biking trails and drone operation areas which may reveal new trends in park amenities having to do with evolving recreational preferences.

Discussion and Conclusions

The results of this study reveal that many of the golf courses repurposing into parks are doing so using a variety of funding sources and partnerships. Public entities these days do not appear to have the funding sources to take in closed golf courses on their own unless they happen to be in more affluent municipalities. There also appears to be an inclination for non-profit organizations to acquire golf course land for open space preservation and habitat creation. All three courses that are now solely owned and operated by non-profits are nature preserves, one of which is also unique in that it is partially a farm and orchard that offers job training and community supported agriculture for their community.

The data revealed some potential trends in priorities for conversion of the land. Half of the parks had current plans for the active

Right: Lehigh Acres Trailhead Park includes a half-mile paved trail, picnic pavilions, a boardwalk, an outdoor fitness area and restrooms. The Bermuda grass from the former golf course was transformed into a roughly 3-acre wildflower prairie. Plants for the park were chosen for their water filtering qualities and include: red maple, pond apple, swamp hibiscus, pickerelweed, arrowhead, dahoon, holly, bald cypress, buttonbush, duck potato and sand cordgrass.

restoration of meadows, watercourses or wetlands. Almost all of the parks preserved large quantities (1/3 or more) of the golf course as open space or natural areas. This is likely due to the large nature of the parcels but could also reveal a move toward prioritizing space for habitat and ecosystem enhancement.

As mentioned previously, the courses that have become primarily open space preserves are owned by non-profit groups and provide few amenities beyond trails, nature viewing and education. This could also be due to a limited source of funding. However, trails appear to be the highest demand amenity in almost all of the parks. By preserving the land, maintaining it minimally with trails and allowing public access, these golf courses can provide associated benefits at a fraction of the cost of larger parks full of amenities. Ironically, of the parks that had the more extensive list of amenities, the majority had not been built yet nor did they have a reliable source of continued funding for the implementation.

The research revealed that 210 of 365 (58%) closed golf course facilities had plans, which means that 155 (42%) had no plans that could be found and almost all of those courses are sitting vacant. Many developers, municipalities, homeowners, and stakeholders are still looking for solutions for these closed golf courses that don't involve total development. Creative approaches to preserving the land as parks and open space exists for privately-owned facilities. In cases where funding for conversion was not easily accessible, many of the parks operated as a passive recreation space with just trails and a few benches until additional funding could be found, providing access to the open space with less initial investment.

These parks and open space conversions should serve as examples for conserving golf courses as open space. Conserving golf courses as open space upholds and improves upon the valuable qualities that the golf courses provide in the first place while providing public access and greater benefits to the ecosystem and the community.

KEYWORDS for LandscapeArchitect.com: golf, course, uofa, university of Arizona, plano, ridgegline golf course, golf course, education, professor, professors, Kelly Cederberg, los rios golf course, Lehigh Acres Trailhead Park, Lee County, park, parks



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